

Traditions: Social

The concept of tradition has been important in the history of sociology in the twentieth century, but its signification has completely changed in contemporary works. At the turn of the century, sociologists and anthropologists utilized this concept to outline a type of society defined by traits placed in opposition to other traits characterizing industrial society, and in a well-known work Max Weber has distinguished three types of authority: legal-rational, charismatic, and traditional. One hundred years later, sociology considers tradition as an invented reference developed by societies in function of the demands of the present (Hobsbawm) and as a form of rationality among others that orients action (Boudon).

The tradition-modernity dichotomy dates back to Saint-Simon who compared the characteristics of the emerging industrial society to those of the *Ancien régime*. This dichotomy became a key element in explaining the social transformations that were oc-

curing in modernizing societies during the first part of the twentieth century. The defining traits of the traditional society are well known: the fusion of family and business, the division of labor dictated by social structure (age, gender, relatives), reference to custom as the dominant value, the privileged attention accorded to saving and accumulation to the detriment of productive investment, the importance of the local community, relative autarky, and self-sufficiency. The American anthropologist Horace Miner (1939) found in Saint-Denis-de-Kamouraska in Quebec a kind of archetype of the preindustrial traditional rural society depicted in a work that remains a classic in social sciences read by generations of American students. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the industrial society described by Raymond Aron, Georges Friedmann, Daniel Bell, and others is marked by the importance of technique, economic growth, calculation and management, productive investment, and the accumulation of capital, separation of family and business, establishment of a labor market, urbanization.

The transition from traditional to industrial society paradigm and the folk-urban continuum formalized by R. Redfield (1956) were criticized sometimes as descriptive approaches of social change and as paradigms with limited explanatory power. Henri Mendras (1976) underlined the fact that this vision of things denied the proper originality of nonindustrial societies and their diversity and he recalled that the concept of the traditional society often embraces different types of societies that are in fact very different (e.g., from primitive societies to peasant societies). He argued that one must not confuse traditional societies and peasant societies. If hunter-gatherer societies are totally independent, peasant societies are relatively autonomous but are embedded in larger, global societies having diverse characteristics. The paradigm of the transition from traditional to industrial society is based on an evolutionist postulate, that has been placed in question, that makes the developed societies the norm to be obtained. In the same vein, we can criticize the thesis of the resistance to social change by tradition because it supposes clear, obtainable goals and also the existence of bad faith on the part of traditional individuals attached to the past and incapable of recognizing the merits of anything new (Boudon 1984).

Consider another manner of conceiving the tradition-modernization opposition. Lévi-Strauss (1962) compares the knowledge and technique of the handyman, traits of a traditional society, with the knowledge and technique of the engineer, attributes of the industrial society. The first type represents empirical and inductive knowledge. It depends on a long tradition of precision which can be complex and efficient but it is also filled with errors, notably as to the explanation of its efficiency. The knowledge of the engineer is of another order. It is based upon experimental science, accumulation of scientific knowl-

edge, verification, technique, manipulation of objects, operationalization, and organization. The classical opposition in economics between protectionism and free-trade also illustrates the opposition between the ancestral or traditional ways of doing business and the modern methods. The authorities in the Republic of Venice jealously protected the ancestral traditions of their glass-makers, sources of important benefits. Contemporary entrepreneurs count on innovation, discovery, free circulation, investment and strategic alliances to support the growth of their activities and their profits.

The examples of the engineer and the entrepreneur clearly demonstrates that tradition and modernization are differentiated in two respects. First, the relationship to time is different. Tradition is oriented towards a legitimate reference to the past, while modernization is oriented towards the mastery of the future, the discovery of the new. Second, tradition and modernization are marked by a strongly different manner of intervening in the world, of producing goods and services; an empirical manner of learning over time and transmission across social relations that are embedded within the family or small communities, and a scientific manner that asserts itself as the result of research and calculation, embedded within complex social networks and formal organizations.

E. Shils (1981) proposed a definition of the concept of tradition which was largely accepted. He defined tradition as anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. According to Shils, traditions include beliefs, norms, institutions, as well as material objects which all individuals will find when they grow up; traditions refer to transmitted things, ideas, and values. It is now generally accepted that the scope of tradition should be narrowed down. We will retain two aspects—which are hidden in the folk-urban continuum or in the community-society ideal type of Tonnies—which contribute to define tradition in contemporary analyses.

First, to be part of a tradition, objects, norms, or ideas have to be well alive, and never having been destroyed, abandoned, or forgotten. Specifically qualified fragments of the heritage should retain a strong intimate link with the present to be a tradition.

Second, it is generally accepted that traditions change with the passage of time. Traditions are not immutable and they are re-examined and questioned. Tradition is a transmitted heritage which survives and orients contemporary actions, but this heritage is often transformed (Halbwachs 1935/1994), Eisenstadt 1973). Sztompka (1994) stated that a special part from the whole of the historical heritage is elevated to the category of tradition by contemporary people for their own usage. In the United States, national history is being rewritten to take into account the role of Amerindians, women, and ethnic minorities.

Canada delimited the frontiers of a new territory that contains an Inuit majority in the North in

1998—Nunavut—that took into account the testimonies of the oral traditions of the elders. Scientific cartography and satellite images were the privileged work instruments but the life histories and experiences of those who inhabited the land were taken into account, especially to establish its Eastern frontier. Similarly, the oral traditions of Canadian Amerindians and the *wampums* of their material culture were also taken into account as elements of proof in the Canadian system of justice that examined their grievances and ancestral rights. Canadian judges are now obliged to interpret the rights of Amerindians in light of ancestral traditions and the orientations of modern ways of living (equality between men and women, for example). There is no doubt that the resort to tradition will inspire other courts of justice throughout the world where we find indigenous cultures, in Latin America or in Oceania, for example. Here tradition also appears as a legitimate form of knowledge—but different—than the scientific knowledge and cartographic techniques of historians or jurists and it is susceptible to applications in the same way as the latter. Tradition no longer appears as the only or principle source that orients behavior and decisions but as one element among others that is susceptible to being criticized.

Hobsbawm (1983) has contributed to the new examinations of tradition by stressing its *invented* character. He has distinguished three groups of invented traditions. First, there are traditions that express the social cohesion of nations and communities. Second, traditions can legitimize an existing order, status, institutions, or authority. Third, traditions which socialize certain values or rules of behavior into individuals. The traditions of the British crown, for example, leaves the impression that they are rooted deep into the past. Now the work of historians has demonstrated that these traditions are of more recent origins and were invented recently (in fact in the nineteenth century) in order to give greater legitimacy to the institution of the monarchy. Closer to us, the celebration of the new Beaujolais in France is a recent creation, the fruit of a new approach in the marketing of the wine of this region that has been successful in countries where they appreciate French wines. Another example, Australia. At the moment, the Australians are questioning whether or not they should abandon the royal symbols from their colonial period. If they decide to abandon those traditions and symbols, they will probably give themselves another symbolic tradition to mark the birth of their society peopled in large part by immigrants. A new tradition will therefore be created for use in the present.

The protection of the environment, fauna, and flora, has become a daily theme at the end of the twentieth century. In North America, the Amerindians have been characterized as environmentalists before the advent of an environmental movement. Research by anthropologists and historians has demonstrated that

the picture is much more complex. Krech (1999) recalls that the Amerindians had overexploited the beaver in the St. Lawrence Valley after the arrival of Europeans in New France in the sixteenth century to the point of extinction. The notions of environmental protection and endangered animals were foreign to the traditional culture of the aborigines, because the way of life of hunter-gatherers is based on maximal exploitation of the immediate environment. On the other hand, the Amerindians have an animist conception of the animal world. Thus, the Plains Indians believed that they could not allow an animal to escape under the pretext that it would warn the others to not venture in that area, they therefore killed all the animals they saw. Because they believed in reincarnation, the majority of Amerindians thought that the dead animals would, at any rate, return the following season. For Krech, the myth of the ecologist Indian essentially reflects contemporary preoccupations for the environment rather than the traditional and historical culture of the Amerindians.

This analysis led us to the following conclusion: contemporary sociology has abandoned the transition paradigm (from traditional to industrial societies) and now integrates tradition into analyses of ongoing social change. In recent works, tradition is used to define a type of society (be it theoretical or empirical), and it also defines a subjective orientation toward action. These different approaches will be developed here.

In his general theory of action, Freitag (1986) defines three types of societies based on three forms of definition of the norms of social action. The first form he proposes—culture—defines mythic and archaic societies. The second one—power—defines two other types: traditional societies and modern societies, the later ones built against tradition. The third form of regulation—control—characterizes postmodern society, in which a large number of organizations contribute to the structuration of society.

Tradition is also used to describe empirically different societies. Following Max Weber's arguments, Huntington (1996) argued that the world is divided into eight major cultural zones which revealed persistent cultural differences caused by different religious traditions which are still powerful despite industrialization and the same forces of economic development. Inglehart and Baker (2000) have studied values in surveys made in 65 countries which cover more than 75 percent of the world population and they observed the persistence of distinctive traditional values.

Tradition is also considered as a normative orientation toward action, a perspective underlying Tocqueville's works (1856/1986, for example). In his works, Raymond Boudon formulates a general theory of action based on the actor's search for meaning. He proposes to enlarge the concept of the rationality of the actor by distinguishing five types of rationality:

utilitarian, teleological, axiological, cognitive, and traditional. All of these types of rationality describe the good reasons why the actor is driven to act in a certain way. Economists and rational choice theorists privilege the utilitarian rationality based on the pursuit of self-interest. However, for Boudon, there are other kinds of reasons/motives that can also influence the way that individuals act, and to limit the content of rationality to the single dimension of utility is an exercise in reductionism. Custom and habit can also incite individuals to act in a certain way. Therefore, when one speaks of traditional rationality—'it has always been that way'—he is speaking of one type of rationality among others.

For Boudon, sociological analysis has to define the context and circumstances in which one type of rationality or another is at work, keeping in mind that one type is no more important than another. This approach permits us to understand the role of tradition in sociological explanations. In peasant societies, the rhythm of the seasons is of major importance and the technologies are not very developed (Weber 1976). Here, the reference to custom and tradition is strong and the individuals do not have good reasons to question that which already works. They are led to value the stability and the family that provides the necessary labor to exploit the land. However, when technological inventions appear to menace the traditional ways of life, tradition remains important for understanding the implantation of these transformations or the difficulties in accepting them. Mendras (1967) has demonstrated that the introduction of inventions in peasant societies cannot be understood independently of the welcoming culture because these innovations have to be first integrated into the traditional culture before being fully accepted.

Boudon (1992) gives a good example that demonstrates the role of tradition in ongoing social change in restating the observations contained in the celebrated monograph by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927/1984) on immigrant Polish peasants in Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century. The immigrants that adapted the most rapidly to the welcoming society were those that manifested the highest degree of traditionalism and attachment to their original milieu. This integration in a familiar milieu gave them support and a frame of reference that slowed down the process of social disorganization that was typical of immigrant communities when faced with a radical rupture with their traditional original community. The Polish immigrants adopted a rational action that permitted them to integrate themselves in the welcoming society, the traditional collectivity serving as a relay.

To illustrate the richness of this approach, here is an example taken this time from French sociology. In his studies of religious sociology, Le Bras (1955) observed a paradox. The Bretons who migrated to Paris during the 1950s rapidly abandoned religious practice. A superficial analysis gave the impression that they

practiced a strict conformist religion that they abandoned once they were beyond the traditional way of life structured by family and village. Le Bras proposed another explanation by demonstrating that the logic of behavior was the same in the village and in the city. In the village, behavior was regulated by the social group. Going to mass was not only a way of confirming one's Catholicism, it was also participating in a valued social activity which strongly rhythmized life. In the city, in a pluralist environment, going to mass was seen as expressing an opinion and a behavior that did not attract the adherence of all, and in a way, that was contrary to majority opinion. Thus, it was difficult for the newcomers, who wished to integrate in their new environment, to oppose something which was the norm in their original milieu. In this case, one could say that going to mass in the village and not going once in the city follow the same social logic.

All of these examples demonstrate different ways to refer to the concept of tradition. Tradition describes a type of society, but it also defines an orientation of action. This perspective can be found in numerous works of contemporary sociology and demonstrates how different types of rational behavior can mix together. To illustrate this perspective, we will recall how the reference to tradition is posed in three fields of empirical studies of major importance at the end of the twentieth century.

The market consumption society in the developed world proposed standardized products—fast-food, coca-cola, computers, cars, jeans, CDs, films—and globalization tends to homogenize commercial practices and modes of production. However, sociologists have started to discover the multitude of innovative responses in the national cultures of consumption, as Miller (1995) has illustrated in his research. He argues that local contexts remain extremely diversified and, in each case, outside material influences are reinterpreted. Cultural diversity continues to be reaffirmed and supported by living national and cultural traditions. Coca-cola does not occupy the same place in the dietary culture of the French and the connoisseurs state that American pizza is quite distant from its Italian cousin.

New technologies have a great impact on the character of work, but work is also embedded in culture and traditions. People work, and supervise other's work, within stringent institutional limits marked both by national traditions and organizational innovation.

The empirical work on the integration of immigrants in developed societies demonstrates that they do not form totalities with contours that are well defined by their original traditions. In fact, they are quite diverse and in reconstructing their traditions in the new country, they combine innovative elements with the adopted elements of their new home. Tradition and modernity combine to produce new cosmopolitan identities that can be different from one

country to another as Kymlicka (1995) has suggested. The reference to tradition, therefore, remains quite alive in present sociological analyses.

See also: Industrial Society/Post-industrial Society: History of the Concept; Modernity; Modernity: History of the Concept; Modernization, Sociological Theories of; Multiculturalism: Sociological Aspects; Social Change: Types

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